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HOW OUR ROMAN TYPE CAME TO US

BY CHARLES UPSON CLARK

THE development of the print and script which we use is a fascinating story. Every one of us who signs his name traces characters whose origin goes back to the eastern Mediterranean and whose evolution is an abstract of the whole intellectual history of western Europe. Nothing else in our daily life shows so clearly our dependence on Greco-Roman civilization. We may boast of our modernity, we may scorn the classics, we may not know a word of any language but our own; but the moment we write "Pay John Smith five dollars" we do homage to that restless little people of the Ægean and to those proud conquerors of the Seven Hills. Even the despised Middle Ages have their share in this result. Our Roman print which faces you on this page is one of Charlemagne's great contributions to modern life. He was himself unable to write; his affectionate biographer, Einhard, tells us that he used to keep a stencil of his name under his pillow and on sleepless nights try manfully to learn how to form the letters. But he had a deep sense of educational responsibility. He commissioned scholars to collect the Frankish poems and himself composed a grammar of his native Low German tongue; and in the great schools he established at Tours and at Trêves, an English monk, Alcuin, reformed along ancient and beautiful lines the degenerate Merovingian writing and fixed the Caroline hand. This developed gradually into the angular Gothic or black letter which our German friends still cling to; but it was revived in a pure form by Italian humanists just before printing superseded copying. The influence of the Roman Church carried it to England as to Poland and Bohemia; and thus we twentieth-century Americans, with all our independence, use print which Alcuin himself could read at once.

The genesis of our alphabet offers a series of interesting problems. We used to be taught that the Iliad could not have been committed to writing for generations after Homer; but the remarkable discoveries of recent years, especially in Crete, show us that long before that day—perhaps by 1800 B.C.—writing was in common use on Greek soil. Possibly the art was lost during those ages which separate that brilliant Mycenæan civilization from the Athens and Sparta of written history. We are here concerned, however, with only one branch of that enterprising Greek race.

Just off the coast of Attica, opposite the battle-field of Marathon, lies Eubœa, an island a trifle smaller than Long Island. Its chief city, Chalcis, sent adventurous colonists over the seas in every direction. Some of these pioneers settled along the Italian coast in very early times at Cumæ, not far from Naples. They carried with them their special form of the Greek alphabet; and the Italian natives adopted the writing of Chalcis just as naturally as they bought Chalcidian exports. In those days people wrote from right to left, as the Hebrews and Arabs do yet; but to some inventive genius it occurred to write lines alternately right to left and then left to right—*boustrophedon*, the Greeks called it, from the turning of an ox at the end of a furrow. Thence it was an easy step to the permanent left-right direction which we use.

Until a short time ago we knew of nothing in Latin written boustrophedon and only a few brief inscriptions from right to left. But in 1899 the quiet young Venetian architect, Commendatore Boni, who was in charge of the excavations in the Roman Forum, came upon a slab of black marble which clearly covered something of importance. Careful work disclosed a battered block of stone with lines of Latin running boustrophedon across it. Though much of the inscription is lost and much unintelligible, enough is left to show that we have here some ritual from three or four centuries before Augustus. The letters are still almost wholly Greek; our Roman type has only just cut loose from its parent.

After the days of Cicero and Cæsar our material is abundant. Then, as to-day, there were capitals and script. The capitals have come down to us almost without change. They meet us not only in inscriptions, but also in the books of that day—papyrus rolls. Not a single one of these rolls has

survived entire and uninjured; but we have plenty of fragments and a very few papyrus MSS. After papyrus rolls were supplanted by parchment books, in the third and fourth centuries of our era, an occasional capital manuscript has outlasted the use and abuse of ages. Three venerable Virgils, at Rome and Florence, still bear witness to the skill of the Roman scribes of 1,400 or 1,500 years ago.

These professional scribes kept rounding their capitals, in the direction of script, till they had evolved a new hand, the uncial. This became the regular book-hand during the troubled days when Visigoth, Ostrogoth, and Lombard descended upon Rome. Our earliest Latin Bibles, together with many legal and medical works, are uncial manuscripts. A beautiful hand, it nevertheless took too much time and too much parchment. So a small-letter hand was developed beside it, largely cursive, but with the letters separate. This is called the semi-uncial. It was of great importance in the evolution of our Roman type. Not only that, but it was the fashionable hand in southern Italy when Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Kent to convert the "angel" Angles; and Augustine's monks perpetuated it on British soil. There it speedily became a well-marked and handsome style of writing, variously known as the Insular, Anglo-Saxon, or Irish. King Alfred, Bede, Cædmon, all the other founders of our literature, wrote like this; the superb Bibles, treasures of Dublin, Durham, Lichfield, the Bodleian, the British Museum, are a noble monument to the skill and pride of our Anglo-Saxon and Celtic forebears. The Irish use this hand even yet to express their Gaelic tongue; one can buy in New York the New Testament in Irish, printed in Irish type.

Meanwhile the great bulk of documents, whose writers could not afford the time and material necessary for such ornate writing, used script even for books. As the Roman Empire split up into separate Germanic kingdoms, each developed a special hand out of this script. These were like our modern script in having the letters connected more or less. A number of their characteristic features have survived—every time you and I write "&" we are using the ligature for the Latin "et" in the Merovingian hand—the national script of northern France. This French hand grew hard to read; and Charlemagne's great reform, under Alcuin, consisted in resurrecting the semi-uncial with some modifications. Every letter stood alone, as in modern print,

with few exceptions. For three centuries this reformed hand held the field, gradually displacing the Lombard or Beneventan script of Italy and the Visigothic hand of Spain. Then it grew stiff and angular, crystallizing in the Gothic black letter which we know best in calling-cards and newspaper name heads, but which was once as familiar in England as it still is in Germany, Denmark, and Norway.

Dante and Petrarch, Valla and Poggio, usher in modern times. To-day's civilization is largely due to their rediscovery of the classics. They recovered also the older and better style of writing. Italian humanists had their manuscripts copied in this revival of Charlemagne's reformed hand. About 1450 Gutenberg invented movable types, and the printed book sprang into being. Since Gutenberg was a German, there was great danger that the new process would perpetuate only the pointed Gothic; but here again the Italian scholars prevailed.

Thus our printed word is the expression of a debt. Our debt is to Greece first of all, as ever; then to Cumæ of the Sybil and practical, business-like Rome; then part of our gratitude goes to Charles the Great, and another share to the Italians of the Renaissance. They have left us a beautiful heritage of which we may well be proud and glad.

CHARLES UPSON CLARK.